

SARATOGA COUNTY AT WORK 1865 - 1918



By David Chapin Weeks

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In the spring of 1980 Brookside Museum, operated by the Saratoga County Historical Society, will open an exhibit entitled "Saratoga County at Work," made possible through a grant from the New York Council for the Humanities. Our overall concept for the exhibit is to examine the work of the ordinary people of the county during the time period 1865 to 1918. The means of making a living here at that time were closely linked to natural resources; because of our particular geography, there was an unusually broad range of livelihoods, all closely dependent upon one another. This unusual diversity has been instrumental in creating our "sense of place": in an essentially rural county there is great heterogeneity.

As we move from abundant and available resources to an economy of scarcity, the exhibit is intended to interpret the intimate relationship between resources and the manner in which people work and live. Work and changes in work during the period were always dependent upon natural resources and, in turn, created aspects of our environment. We hope to show how the situation and its changes affected people's lives in the past and thereby create an appreciation of the effect the land and work have on our lives today.

As an attempt by a community museum to draw upon recent academic scholarship emphasizing the worker, we were indeed fortunate to receive planning grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the New York Historical Resources Center. These funds made it possible for the society to bring in distinguished scholars, whose research forms the basis of the exhibit. The three major papers were prepared by G. Terry Sharrer of the Smithsonian Institution, Elizabeth Blackmar of Harvard University, and Daniel Walkowitz of New York University.

This small booklet, published with funds granted by the New York Historical Resources Center, is intended to be a preview of the exhibit, and an impressionistic essay to provoke further thought after a visit to the museum.

Brookside
20 July 1979

FIELD HORNE

The people who lived the history of Saratoga County between 1865 and 1918 established a diversified economy from two main ingredients: the natural resources at hand and their own capacity for work.



Haying on George Vanderwerker's farm, Northumberland
(County Historian)

By the time of the Civil War, the Albany area had established itself as an urban center, while the land in Saratoga County slowly gave way to the determined swing of the farmer's axe and the persistent tug of oxen. In its turn, the era of the subsistence farmer was giving way to a market system based on cash, and agricultural economics were largely determined by the needs and demands of the cities.

The area's first market crop — wheat — had declined by competition from midwestern growers; Saratoga County responded with a shift from a single principal cash crop to a mixed husbandry agriculture which integrated livestock with field crops. Diversity meant stability to these nineteenth century farmers. If one crop or animal failed during a year, there were others to fall back on. Poultry and dairy products provided a constant, year-around source of income, and prices for these commodities tended not to fluctuate as much as, for instance, the grain markets had. Soil fertility could now be maintained and, in many cases, improved by the rotation of a variety of crops on the fields, and by the application of livestock manure.

Farms during this period were an integrated system of cycles, each dependent on and supportive of the other. When the price for potatoes ran low, for instance, they could be fed to the stock rather than sold at a loss. Nobody became wealthy under this system, but there was always food on the table.



Boy with his cows, Northumberland
(County Historian)

Saratoga County produced a wide range of farm products at this time. Principal field crops included hay, corn, potatoes, rye, oats, and buckwheat. Of these, hay occupied the greatest acreage, and was shipped to markets as far away as Boston and New York. The introduction of alfalfa and clover, both legumes capable of fixing nitrogen directly from the atmosphere, aided in the restoration of many of the tired fields which had been under cultivation for a century or more. Garden produce from these same farms such as lettuce, tomatoes, radishes, cucumbers, cabbage, and onions, found markets in Albany and Troy, and in the resort towns in the county. Finally, animals gave meat, milk, wool, eggs, cheese, honey, and breeding stock for sale.

By the turn of the century, dairying dominated Saratoga County agriculture. The first product to leave the farms for the market was, surprisingly, not milk. Cheese and butter, typically processed on the farm, were the first dairy products. As railroad transport speeded delivery to the cities and centralized creameries were built, a fluid milk market arose. On the farm, the milk was cooled in streams and dug wells. Jersey, Guernsey, and Holstein cows were the principal breeds, cast generally not more than ten apiece across the fledgling dairy operations of the region. As demand for milk increased, specialization toward dairying became the rule. In fact, New York State led the nation in dairying for most of the nineteenth century.

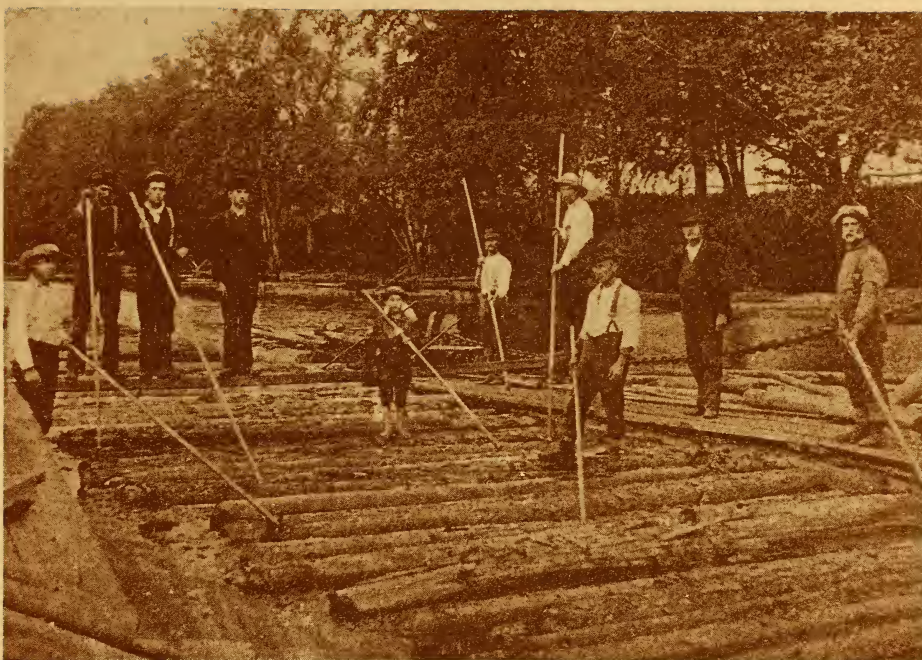
Working a small nineteenth century dairy farm must have been slow, strenuous, and unending.

The hay was mowed with a two horse mower with a five foot sickle. It was raked with a one horse rake. As I recall it, harvesting 30 acres or so of hay was the major occupation on the Cavert farm for about three weeks. The corn was usually planted with a hoe, one man could do about one acre per day. The corn was cultivated with a one horse cultivator and frequently was hand hoed once. One man could hoe about one acre per day. The corn was cut with a corn knife and bound in bundles. Both oats and buckwheat were harvested with a self rake reaper drawn by two horses. The loose oat bundles were loaded onto wagons with an "oat fork" and usually hauled to the barn and later threshed at the convenience of the neighborhood thresher man. Loading unbound oats on a hay rack so that the load did not slide off before one reached the barn was quite an art.—William Cavert



Fruit pickers at Idylwild Orchard, near Vischer Ferry, circa 1910
(Clifton Park Historian)

But things were changing. Land, once the measure of a man's success, lost importance in this new era of perishable goods. As industrialization increased, farmers concentrated more of their investment on livestock and machinery which, unlike land, were not taxed. Incubators, cream separators, cultivators, plows, milking machines and, ultimately, the gasoline-powered tractor all made their way to the farm. With technology a trend was established: fewer farmers produced more of the total agricultural output. It was this shift, from land-extensive field crops to labor- and machine-intensive perishables, which characterized farming between 1860 and 1920.

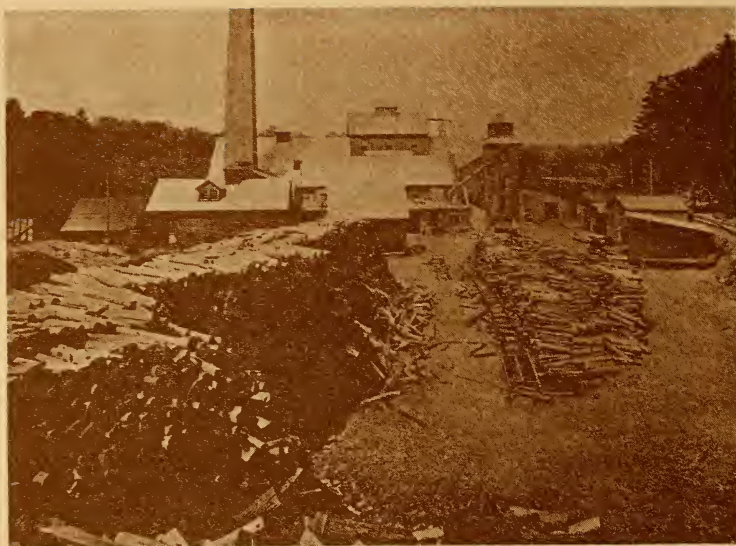


Poling logs at Corinth
(Jon Kelley)

The emergence of the lumber industry complemented an agricultural economy. Farmers continuously cleared new land for cultivation, using the felled trees for fuel and building materials. Timber became the county's greatest natural resource; not as glamorous as others, it was the foundation upon which all of the industry of the period was built.

Wood was burned for charcoal, and the ashes were used to make soda and lye. Bark was gathered for the tanneries. Agricultural implement manufacturers who sold goods to farmers also bought from them some of their raw materials, such as tool handles. Sawn lumber supported a host of local industries, including wagon-makers, coopers, cabinet- and coffin-makers, canal boat and bridge builders, and makers of doors, washboards, and sashes. By 1860 22 saw mills had been built to satisfy the demand.

The pulp and paper industry demanded the most wood. Softwoods from the Adirondacks were floated down the Hudson or drawn to the various mills powered by the Hudson or the creeks. The most important of these was the Hudson River Pulp and Paper Company factory, established at Corinth in 1869. By 1880, paper making at 18 different plants accounted for more capital value and employment than any other industry in the county.



**Glen Sulphite Pulp Mill, Ballston Spa
(Brookside)**

As the mechanization of farming displaced more and more people from the land, the lumber industry provided many of them with an alternative source of employment. The Wooden Age would not last, however, much beyond World War I. Wasteful lumber practices contributed to a dwindling supply of mature forests, and the introduction of metals, and later plastics, diverted attention away from restorative measures until mid-century.



**Seabury's Sawmill, Jockey Street, Galway
(Brookside)**

By 1865 the transition from a subsistence/barter system to a market/cash economy was complete. Industrialization was closely linked to improved transportation, the collection of raw materials, and the recreation industry which grew out of the increased buying power of the consumer.

An industrial center was emerging around Albany, Schenectady and Troy which was far more powerful and influential than any in the county. As a result, Saratoga County industries developed to complement the foundries and mills of their southern neighbors. And as the natural resources dictated, many of the earliest industries were either paper mills or tanneries scattered among the villages.



**Unidentified mill, by Jesse S. Wooley
(Brookside)**

Much of the industrial growth of this period was the work of ambitious individuals. Isaiah Blood ran a prosperous scythe and axe factory in Bloodville, just north of Ballston Spa. In 1862 George West bought the Empire Paper Mill in Rock City Falls, and by 1875 he had acquired seven other mills in the area, converting them to paper mills. George E. Knox founded a hoop skirt factory in Ballston Spa, and Samuel Haight owned a tannery in Milton Center. Other notable industries included the Button Fire Engine Works and C.W. Eddy's foundry in Waterford, the Glen Paper Collar Mill in Ballston Spa, and the Saratoga Victory Manufacturing Company near Schuylerville.

But by 1907 many of the smaller industries were defunct, following the deaths of the individuals who started them. What survived was concentrated in the larger towns. Ballston Spa, active as a shipping center, became the site of the Davison and Namack Foundry, built for General Electric. South Glens Falls grew into an electric power center as the home of the Glens Falls Gas Company, the Glens Falls Electric Light and Power Company, and the New York Power and Light Company. The thriving paper mill in Corinth was bought and expanded by International Paper Company. Mechanicville emerged as the knitting center with no less than seven mills. Waterford, always diverse and flexible, proclaimed the new era of petrochemical products with the Cluett-Peabody Bleachery, and in Saratoga Springs the G.F. Harvey Company employed 100 hands and 66 traveling salesmen in chemical manufacture. Saratoga Springs also supported a substantial construction industry, corresponding to the rise in hotel patronage.



Workers at Saratoga Knitting Company, Stillwater, circa 1901-06
(Stillwater Historian)

The character of industry changed greatly during these 50 years. For the most part, industry moved from the villages to the larger towns, and the individual establishments which had ushered industrialization into the county either closed or were acquired by national corporations.



"Largest load of rakes" from the Sumner Sawmill, Edinburg
(Edinburg Historian)

Transportation proved to be the backdrop against which all forms of economic development within the county took place. Farms and businesses were brought closer to markets as a system for the expedient movement of goods developed.

The first roads were the rivers. Where nature provided none, men dug their own, such as the 40 foot wide, four foot deep, 364 mile long Erie Canal completed in 1825. It connected Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Rome, Amsterdam, Schenectady, and Waterford before passing into the Hudson. A second canal, the Champlain, linked Montreal through Lake Champlain to the Hudson at Waterford. Canals were a great improvement over dirt roads for the transport of bulk goods.

What passed for water craft in those days was a floating circus: dugouts, birch bark canoes, scows, barges, and rafts of all sorts. The most elegant of these were called packet boats, a comfortable and sophisticated way to travel for those who could afford them. Draft animals at 12 and 15 mile relays provided power for these and other large canal boats.

As transportation developments spurred economic growth, local industries relied on it and in turn, prompted its expansion. Soon the race was on. Stagecoach travel became popular prior to the Civil War, and with a vast supply of local timber, certain routes boasted corduroy roads made from two to three inch planks resting on 4x4 sleepers. Wooden roads never lasted more than a few years, but the local saw mill owners were the last to complain.

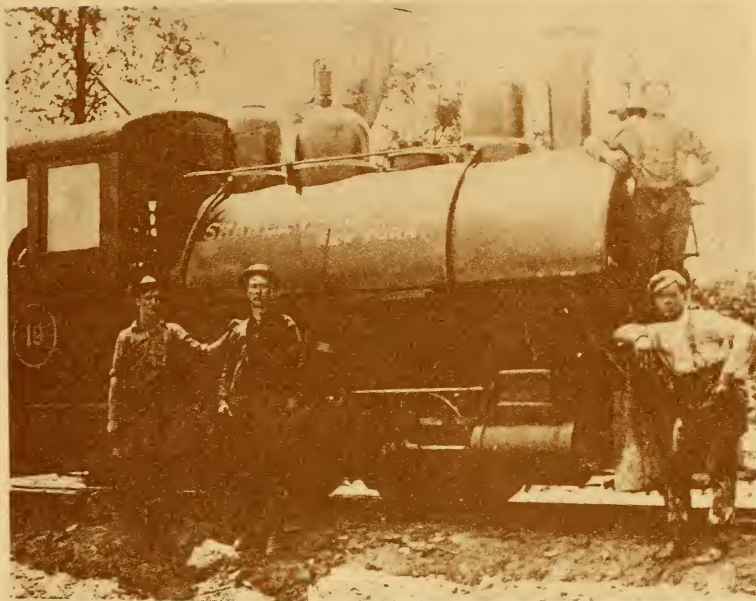
In 1833 the first railroad entered the county, connecting Schenectady with Saratoga Springs. Others followed shortly thereafter, including the Rensselaer and Saratoga Railroad, the Saratoga and Washington Railroad connecting with Whitehall, the Adirondack Railroad leading from Corinth to North Creek, and the Saratoga Lake Railroad specially built for the summer tourist season. Most of the major connections were later consolidated to form the Delaware and Hudson Railroad. The railroads had the advantage of speed. A trip from Albany to Schenectady which took a day by canal took about an hour by rail.



Lock on the Champlain Canal, Waterford
(Waterford Historian)

With the development of the electric motor, electric trolleys found their way into town life. Quiet and clean, they held great promise for local travel. But plagued by imperfections in the electric motor and a tendency to be underpowered, the trolley business was doomed, especially as it faced, along with the railroads, a new competitor — the gas-powered automobile.

As long as roads remained muddy quagmires in the spring, dust bowls in the summer, and essentially impassable in the winter, the railroads were safe. But the convenience of door-to-door service and the freedom of self-determined propulsion were difficult to resist, the measures were soon taken to encourage the construction of better highways. Authorization of Rural Free Delivery of mail in 1893, the use of light asphaltic oils to keep dust down and improve drainage, the bicycle craze of the 1890s, and finally, the automobile, all pushed highway improvements. By 1910 surfaced road mileage exceeded railroad mileage in the county, and towns were going heavily in debt for highway construction.



Crew of Engine #19
(Mechanicville Historian)



Outing at Elnora, 1913
(Clifton Park Historian)

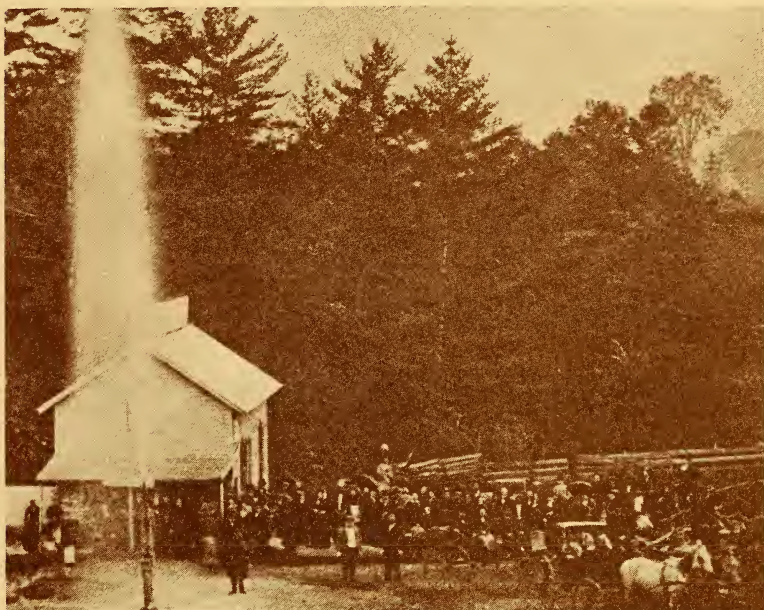
The indigenous natural resources that formed the economic backbone of Saratoga County were common to many of the counties in upstate New York. But a geologic fault in the bedrock somewhere below Saratoga Springs and Ballston Spa allowed the natural ground water to flow from the earth with carbonic acid in solution, giving the water bubbles. The local geology also provided an array of minerals that in differing combinations created the subtle varieties of flavor peculiar to each spring.

Public attraction to the springs began for reasons of health. Appealing to this aspect of the water's mystique, one nineteenth century pamphlet explained, "As a cathartic, the waters are pleasant to taste, grateful to the stomach, efficient as an evacuant while they leave the alimentary canal stronger and its function more vigorous."



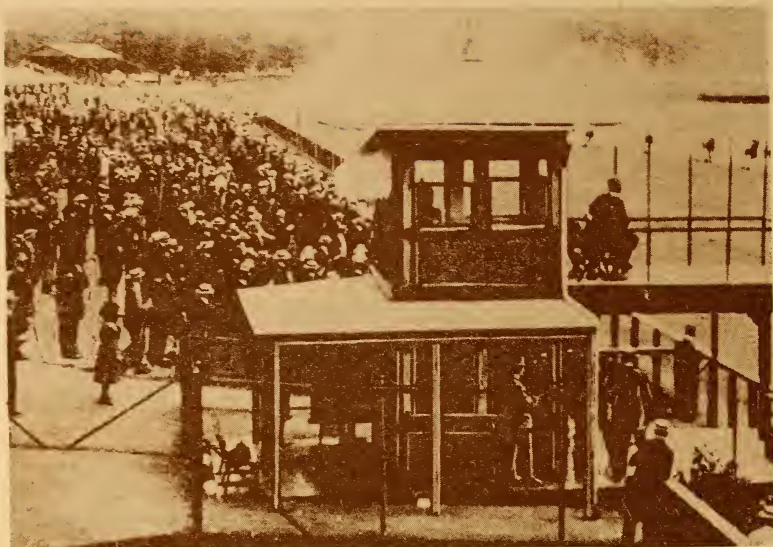
Dipper boy at High Rock Spring, circa 1885
(Saratoga Springs Public Library)

The search for health and purity led to the growth of the summer "season" as a resort for the nation. The heyday of the resort and mineral water industries occurred between 1865 and 1917, although Ballston Spa was the first to establish the rituals of summer nearly 65 years earlier. Horse racing and gambling became a part of the Season during this time, with the organization of the Saratoga Racing Association in 1863 and the construction of the Casino by John Morrissey in 1870. With these additions, Saratoga's symbols of health and purity were fused with ones of fashion and status. Summer became a kind of social fashion show, theatrical in nature, where people, curious about other people, met anonymously for a week or two. The spas thrived nonetheless, and in 1870 one of the biggest spring water companies, the Congress and Empire Springs Company, was valued at a million dollars and packaged over a million bottles of water.



Champion Spouting Spring, circa 1871
(Historical Society of Saratoga Springs)

The mineral water cult held in such deference by the urban wealthy was never completely convincing to the local people. To them, the resorts were a way to make money, and they observed the resort life around them variously with pride, resentment, affection, and humor. The capital boon to the area, however, failed to have a corresponding effect on employment. The tourist industry was strictly seasonal, generally attracting migrant waiters, cooks, and hotel personnel.



Saratoga Racetrack, circa 1910
(George Bolster)

At its peak, the Congress and Empire Springs Company employed only 200 workers. And by the turn of the century many of the springs were beginning to dry up as commercial extraction of gas from the mineral waters was exploited for the expanding soft drink industry.



"Our artist at Mount McGregor"
(Historical Society of Saratoga Springs)

A period of reform rose up, aimed not only against the destruction of a natural resource, but against gambling and horse racing as well. The morality of the Saratoga summer tradition was being questioned by some. Particularly notable was the camp-meeting community at Round Lake, a Methodist response to the high-style glitter of Saratoga Springs. Round Lake served a cottage community of 8,000 people at their summer meeting, each "longing for a gentler time."

In 1909, the mineral springs passed from private to public control with legislation under the Brackett Whitney Saratoga Reservation Act. Their efficacy against disease was questioned, and with the change of fashion, Saratoga Springs was almost eclipsed until new amusements replaced the quiet self-indulgences of the Victorian resort.



Parlor of the United States Hotel, circa 1895
(Saratoga Springs Public Library)

The economic development of Saratoga County was nurtured by the availability of local natural resources. The patterns and transitions of the period reflect themes of flexibility, diversity, exploitation, and conservation — components for what was between the years 1865 and 1918 a lively and engaging time. Though most of the work was in the form of services to outsiders, it charts the intimate association and interplay between the people and their surroundings: that which forms our heritage as the people of Saratoga County.

FRONT COVER: **Haying in Congress Park**, stereoscopic view
by P. H. McKernon, 1869-1871 (Saratoga Springs Public
Library)

BACK COVER: **Kaydeross Railroad near Rock City Falls**, by
Jesse S. Wooley (Brookside)



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